

Reading for meaning

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Background to research

This research was developed from a previous CELT project (2003/04 Focussed seminar groups, Clarke, 2004) in which students were asked to read a specific article and then discuss it in a seminar situation. It was noted that students approached reading in different ways but in the main interacted with the text by marking it in particular ways. However, from working with different groups of undergraduate students, and discussing this with colleagues, the general feeling is that many students balk at reading academic literature. This is affirmed in research undertaken by Mateos *et al.* (2007) who found 93% of students on three different degree courses stated that the main source of accessing information came through oral exposition from the lecturer. In addition to the previous CELT research, a separate piece of research was undertaken as part of a CETL project which looked at how level 1 students approach academic writing (Clarke and French, 2007). Clearly, the link between efficient reading and appropriate levels of academic writing is undisputed; Wyse (2006:4) suggests that ‘(we) must learn to read like writers.’ Consequently, researching the process by which students assimilate their reading and apply it to their work seemed to be a natural evolution from the previous research projects.

Higher Education institutions throughout England are committed to widening participation and this is especially so in the post-1992 university in the Midlands in which this small-scale piece of research is set. With widening participation and cultural diversity the students bring with them the varied cultural experiences that they have had in their lives but often feel anxious about the amount of reading and how to use their reading to support their ideas.

Literature review

Literacy is both a global and social practice and helps to form our identities through constructing and deconstructing specific meanings through our reading and writing. In addition to forming our own individual identities, students need to develop a ‘collective’ identity if they are to be able to take part in the community of learning that is demanded within a university. Each university discipline will have a specific academic culture but also it is important that students ‘need to learn the uses of reading ... so that it is not merely a vehicle for transmitting information but a real tool for fostering the construction and transformation of knowledge’. (Mateos, *et al.*, 2007:489). In order to create and remodel knowledge it is important that:

“Literacy and learning practices are embedded in various Discourses, or ways of knowing, doing, talking, reading and writing, which are constructed and reproduced in social and cultural practice and interaction.” (Pahl, K and Rowsell, J., 2005, p.17)

It is in the ‘knowing, doing, reading and writing’ that students entering higher education become competent in the academic literacies or registers that enable them to gain their

degrees. For many students, this competence is hard won. Many students struggle with academic writing and for most degrees there is a considerable amount of complementary reading to support the taught sessions. Wyse (2006:4) introduces his text with the statement: "*The single most important thing that you can do to improve the chances of success on your course is to read widely*". However, the student body has changed in composition. There are many more mature students who juggle families and work and sometimes significant life events; in the university that this research took place the number of mature students (students over 21 at entry) in the School of Education has increased by 36% each year since 2000. In addition to this factor, many of the younger students also are involved in paid work some of whom undertake 30+ hours of employment per week to support themselves and contribute towards their fees. Academic staff realise that students literally do not have the time to spend most of the week reading around their chosen discipline. But, if students do not read as widely as previous generations how are they to develop their skills with academic literacy? One of the aspects of lecturers' work is to support students to enhance and develop their academic skills. Many students, though, lack what Bourdieu (1986) calls the 'cultural capital'. It is this 'cultural capital' that evolves through wide reading and different cultural experiences. There are many reasons why this has occurred; the rigidity of the National Curriculum, the drive to transmit knowledge rather than share and create it in the drive to present a good league table result, and educational disadvantage. Cultural capital evolves through a shared language and experience; higher education offers students and lecturers the opportunity to collaborate in developing a common experience of learning together (Glynn, *et al.*, 2006). A crucial aspect in higher education pedagogy is the stance that lecturers take in relation to literacy enhancement. If we believe that literacy is a type of technology 'that can be used in different contexts and for different purposes to complete a set of tasks' (Street 1993 in Pahl and Rowsell, 2005:3) then we are compelled to assist them in this activity. To do otherwise would restrict our students' development of critical thinking that they, as readers, manage how a text is read and understood within different contexts. Efficacy in academic literacies is the ability to draw from a variety of texts different ideas that support or contradict students' own ideas and experiences so that they can present an informed discussion through their writing. Consequently, literacy pedagogy in higher education should offer students an opportunity to engage cognitively with the different texts and ideas and build on their own cultural identities.

Reading and comprehension skills enable students to access knowledge, understand and elaborate concepts and to integrate information from lectures, reference books and journals. As reading is about comprehension, students who are unable to identify and analyse main ideas from the texts are severely disadvantaged in the ability to evaluate and synthesise their own ideas. Consequently, it is important that students learn techniques for reading that will enable them to develop the skills of critical reading which, in turn, leads to the development and enhancement of critical thinking. However, this is perhaps making an assumption that students 'cannot read'; this clearly is not the case. Students would not have met the stringent entry criteria necessary for higher education if they were unable to read. What is a challenge for many students is reading at a different level which usually is formulated with a different language register. Therefore, enhancing students' critical thinking through reading is a pedagogical challenge rather than a deficit on the students' part. Bearne and Marsh (2007:135) make the point that a 'transformative practice' is an approach that can make a difference to how students make use of academic reading. This involves jointly constructed reading

activities, recognition of the different literacy cultures and identities that students bring to the learning process, modelling ways of reading and acknowledging other people's perspectives. Changing our expectations and assumptions 'often means making invisible literacy practices visible (op.cit. p.136). A transformative pedagogical practice can perhaps mean that both students and lecturers enter unfamiliar territory that may be uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the collaborative practice of sharing the meaning of academic texts and explicit intervention through materials and pedagogical approaches makes it possible to bring about improvements (Mitchell and Riddle, 2004, *in* Goodwyn and Stables, 2005).

The enhancement of critical thinking through reading also affects the ability to be a critical writer and persuasive communicator. Both these skills are necessary for academic success but are also crucial for the world of employment. Consequently, if we do not provide the toolkit for deconstructing a text, unravelling the argument and theoretical perspective, the ability to identify the specific ideologies and put some meaning to specific academic literacies, then we are putting our students in a disadvantaged position in gaining and maintaining appropriate employment.

This small scale research was located in the School of Education and focussed on degree students who were not on teacher training courses. The students are studying on the Early Childhood Studies programme. The aims of the research were:

- a) to identify how students extrapolate relevant information from a given piece of text;
- b) to enable students to engage critically within a taught session with appropriate literature in the field;
- c) to evaluate different intervention strategies to give students some confidence in their own reading.

Methodology

The methodology used mixed data collection tools which were appropriate for the qualitative research that this project entailed. A case study method was adopted with the underlying theory relating to a phenomenological approach to gain student perceptions about their ability to understand and extrapolate relevant information from their reading (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2006).

Three groups of students, one from each year of undergraduate study, took part in the research. The undergraduate students are studying Early Childhood Studies which is a non-teacher training degree course and therefore the graduates enter a wide range of professions that encompass health, education and social services. The researcher taught all three groups so the students were accustomed to particular ways of working. This, though, raised the question of ethics. The reading exercise was integrated within the sessions as part of the learning process. However, for the questionnaires and the focus groups, students were given the option of participating, or not, and the purposes of gathering specific data were explained to the students (Mason, 2002).

A short piece of text (approximately 2000 words) was given to each of the groups in each session. Students were asked to read this through using any strategies that they

were used to. Most used a highlighter pen but how the pen was used to identify the key points showed considerable variations.

The text was then reviewed with input from the tutor about specific reading strategies and cues about what actually to look for to maximise the learning. The cues included identifying the way that the author constructed the argument; examining whether there was sufficient supporting evidence; considering if any particular values had been promoted and analysing the structure of the article in terms of grammatical conventions.

Just prior to the end of the session, students were asked to complete a short questionnaire of 5 questions comprising open and closed questions about the reading exercise. This was a voluntary activity and 35/42 completed the questionnaire. This was a 83% response rate for level 1; level 2 respondents to the questionnaire: 38/41 (93%) and for level 3 39/45 (87%). Although these were completed anonymously, they were undertaken whilst the students were still in the teaching room and I, as lecturer and researcher, was still present. Therefore, the 'truth' in the responses may be deemed questionable and as Holliday points out; 'difficulties increase when questionnaires are delivered face-to-face' (Holliday, 2007: 3).

The questions asked were:

- a) Did you find reading this article supplemented the information given during the session?
- b) Did you find reading the article in the session helpful to your learning?
What was helpful? Why was it not helpful to your learning?
- c) Was the discussion about how people read helpful to your own learning?
- d) In the review of the article, following individual reading, which, if any, of the points raised did you think will be helpful to you in the future?
- e) Please write any comments you wish about this exercise.

Questions a, b, and c were deliberate closed questions just to obtain a quick response. Questions d and e gave students more opportunity to answer in greater detail so that their learning could be assessed (d) and secondly to try to gauge their feelings about the exercise and whether their reading skills could benefit from intervention strategies (d and e). As these were completed at the end of a teaching session and I was still in the room, there were challenges relating to reliability. However, this tool was effective as it captured the feelings and responses immediately after the activity whilst it was still fresh in the students' minds (Mason, 2002).

This process was repeated at level 2 and level 3. The results are shown in table 1. The additional annotations on the given material were noted at level 3.

From each group 5 students volunteered to take part in the focus group sessions. The discussions for these were semi-structured based on the questionnaires but enabled the students to give more detailed responses. Although the approach was semi-structured, it was important that the group 'led the way as far as possible' (Lichtman, 2006: 130). This was particularly important as the moderator was also the researcher and the tutor for each of the groups. The responses were made in note form on the flip chart which was visible to all. Points noted were repeated and clarified so that the comments reflected what was being said. Each interview lasted for 40 minutes.

Results and findings

For the first data collection method, the reading of the text, at level 1, there were 42 students; 18 highlighted 2/3 sentences in each paragraph (43%); 10 highlighted what they considered were key words (24%); 3 used the highlighter in a similar manner but also made their own notes (7%) and 10 students highlighted the entire text (24%); 1 student did not write on the text or notes.

Table 1

Students	Highlighting everything within text	Highlighting 2/3 sentences within text	Highlighting key words only	No highlighting/ notes at all	Annotations on reading material
Level1	10/42	19/42	12/42	1/42	0
Level 2	8/41	22/41	7/42	4/41	0
Level 3	5/45	21/45	12/45	4/45	3

This method showed interesting variations. The students from each group who had highlighted all of the text gave the following reasons for this behaviour:

"I might miss out something important." (Levels 1, 2 and 3)

"I thought that was what you had to do." (Level 1)

"The colour helps me to read it". (One level 2 student)

"Always done it like this." (Level 2 and 3)

"Our tutor at college said to do it like this so we would remember." (Level 1)

In evaluating the students who had not highlighted at all, the one student at level 1 was not asked so that she was not singled out. The responses from the level 2 and 3 students were:

"I find it easier to take in what I am reading if I don't highlight." (Level 3)

"The same for me." (Level 3)

"I've never highlighted –it seems a waste of time." (Level 3)

"Don't know really." (Level 2)

"I like to keep the paper clean so that I can read it again." (Level 2)

The three level 3 students who had annotated the reading material commented as follows:

"I like to make comments to help me think about what I have read."

"I was taught to this at school so I have always done that."

"Well I like to comment so that I can see where my thoughts are going."

The results of the questionnaire are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Results from questionnaires.

Questions	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
a).Did you find reading this article supplemented the information given in the session?	42/42	41	45
b) Did you find reading the article in the session helpful to your learning?			
Helpful?	40/42	30/41	41/45
Not helpful?	2/42	11/41	4/45
c) Was the discussion about how people read helpful to your own learning?	38/42	38/41	42/45
d) In the review of the article, following individual reading, were the points raised helpful to you in future learning?	<i>These were taken as a basis</i>	<i>for the focus group</i>	<i>discussions.</i>
e) Please write any comments you wish about this exercise.	<i>These were taken as a</i>	<i>basis for the focus</i>	<i>group discussions.</i>

The focus group responses identified some of the anxieties felt by students when they asked to complete an activity in the session. Comments such as:

"I prefer to read something in my own time so I can take it in properly." (2 students from level 2 and 2 students from level 3)

"I feel like (sic) you know, I should be taking notes." (Level 1, student)

"I'm not sure if I have highlighted the right thing" (Level 1 and level 2 students)

"It was a bit rushed". (Level 1 students)

"Didn't like being put under pressure." (Level 1 students)

However, there was unanimous agreement that re-reading the article with the tutor indicating specific points was valuable to their learning. The specific teaching strategies included: modelling the active skills of reading, annotating the key points, discussing how the author structured the argument and technicalities of constructing sentences and paragraphs. The following comments were noted from level 3 students:

"I wish we could have done this earlier in year 1 or 2."

"I didn't realise I was highlighting too much stuff that wasn't relevant."

"Useful and informative exercise."

"Focused my thinking and reading."

"Helped me to check my understanding of the key points."

"I found it useful to make be to make two or three links with stuff I had learned previously."

Two negative comments: *"I never look that deep."* *"I found it quite boring."* (Both from the same person)

From level 2 students:

"Are other tutors going to do this?"

"This informed me that highlighting lots of information is not always useful."

"I will no longer highlight chunks."

"It helped me rethink the way I read."

"A good way of improving reading skills."

From this group there was only one negative comment: *"It didn't really help me at all- this was the one session I didn't learn anything"*. The reason was: *"it was too drawn out."*

From level 1 students:

"Helped my critical analysis skills."

"Shown (sic) me to note the key points."

"A lot more advice like this."

"Helped me look more closely at the context."

"Made me realise that although you are reading you don't actually take in your reading."

This cohort demonstrated their anxieties about reading during the session within a given timescale as expressed earlier, but did not make any negative comments about the exercise.

Discussion

The responses from this small-scale research indicated that specific interventions enable the students to develop and or enhance particular skills that should help them to study more effectively. This has been well documented by Bearne and Marsh (2007) and Riddle (2004) and others. The pedagogical approach of sharing and discussing the text lies within the social-constructivist domain and is heavily influenced by Vygotsky who suggests that there are three 'forms of mediation: tools, semiosis (signs and symbols) and social interaction.' (Panofsky, in Kozulin, *et al.*, 2003:411). All three tools were used in this research; the tool was the specific reading text; the semiosis was in deconstructing the text and the social interaction came through the collaboration between lecture and students and in the pedagogical approaches.

Again, although this was only a small-scale project, the results and discussions imply that students want these kinds of interventions throughout their period of study.

Benefits

If, as has been suggested, there was some benefit to students from actively using these strategies, then wider use of them is vital to ensure further success and possibly enhance students' chances of gaining better degrees. For this to happen, staff development in this field may encourage staff to adopt some alternative teaching methods so that a transformative process of shared and collaborative learning is embraced. Team teaching may also promote the use of these interventions.

Future developments

There are two possible future developments. The first one would be to test this research across a wider range of students from different disciplines. Secondly, a more longitudinal study which tracked students across the three years of their study with semi-structured interviews conducted at the end of each semester to ascertain the students' self-evaluation of interventions and their perceptions of their abilities to use these skills across a variety of modules.

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